

Honorable J.C. Watts
Slave Labor Task Force Hearing
Testimony

Chairman Brady, Ranking Member Ehlers, and other honorable Members of the House Committee on Administration: I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the Slave Labor Task Force and to introduce to you several of my colleagues who have dedicated their efforts to securing proper recognition for our brothers and sisters whose forced labor more than 200 years ago built the United States Capitol.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.” The era of slavery, when one man could own his fellow men, is no doubt an era that many would like to escape. But, as Lincoln said, we cannot. It is documented in the very stones of the United States Capitol, a monument to the freedom of a nation, constructed by the members of that nation who could not enjoy its gift of freedom.

As someone who is committed to studying the past and applying its lessons to change the future, I believe it is important for our nation and for our community to be educated on the contribution that the enslaved Africans made to the U.S. Capitol. To that end, in 2000 while I was a Member of the House of Representatives, I, along with my good friend John Lewis of Georgia and others, created the Slave Labor Task Force to

study the contribution of enslaved African Americans in building the U.S. Capitol and to make recommendations to the Congress concerning appropriate recognition of these contributions. The Task Force was officially established on October 24, 2000, through a Congressional Resolution. Since that time, many talented men and women have lent their efforts to the work of the task force, and I would particularly like to thank Senator Lincoln of Arkansas, Clerk of the House Lorraine Miller, and historical experts Currie Ballard, Bettye Gardner, and Sarah Davidson, who will be speaking later this afternoon.

To complete the first part of its mission, the Slave Labor Task Force directed the Architect of the Capitol to create a documented history of the slave labor that contributed to the Capitol's construction. This history brought to light the full scope of their labor. From 1795 to 1801, and likely beyond this period, the builders of the Capitol rented the labor of Africans forced into slavery by their owners. These borrowed workers completed the hardest tasks, including quarrying stone and casting bricks by hand, hauling stone from the quarry to the work site, and felling trees. Today, the work of these individuals is documented most clearly in the walls on the original East Front of the Capitol—this stone was quarried and transported by African American slave laborers more than 200 years ago. Their work also deserves the credit for the columns in Statuary Hall and the Old Senate Chamber.

Sadly, we know the names and stories of only two of the African American slave laborers who worked on the Capitol. Nevertheless, their stories give us a glimpse into the reality of their contributions and give us a human context into which we cast our recognition of the total efforts made by the enslaved laborers. The first of these two individuals was George Pointer. Mr. Pointer was an enslaved man who purchased his freedom and later captained a boat that carried stone to the Capitol construction site. The second individual was Philip Reid. Mr. Reid was a slave laborer whose contribution to the construction of the Capitol included assisting in casting the statue “Freedom.” Later in this hearing, historian Felicia Bell will tell Philip Reid’s story.

The Slave Labor Task Force has done an outstanding job in documenting the history of the slave laborers who contributed to the U.S. Capitol construction. In 2007, the Task Force began developing recommendations to fulfill the second of its responsibilities. After extensive review of legislation and documentation, as well as consultation with history and museum studies experts, the Task Force is pleased to present to you today its recommendations for the most appropriate means of honoring the African Americans who made such an important contribution to the United States.

In presenting these recommendations, we as a Task Force are pleased to have Dr. Bettye J. Gardner, Sarah Jean Davidson, and Currie Ballard to testify on the importance of preserving this significant piece of history.

Dr. Bettye Gardner is an accomplished professor of History whose work has raised awareness of the contributions of the African American community throughout history. She received a Bachelor's and Master's degree from Howard University and a Ph.D. from George Washington University. She has been honored for her work with numerous awards, including the Outstanding Educator Award in 2005 and the Bethune Service Award in 2006.

Sarah Jean Davidson has been a force for positive change throughout her life. At age 15, Ms. Davidson organized the North Little Rock, Arkansas NAACP Youth Council and served as its president. The council was responsible for the change in segregation policies at public facilities in North Little Rock. Ms. Davidson has worked tirelessly to preserve African American history in North Little Rock, documenting and preserving history so others have the opportunity to learn from it. She received a Bachelor's degree from Howard University as well as a Master's degree in education from Catholic University.

Currie Ballard has worked throughout his career to preserve a record of African American accomplishment, serving on the Presidential Commission responsible for the African American Museum in Washington, D.C. He also served as the Historian-in-Residence at Langston University in Oklahoma for 12 years. We are all likely familiar with Currie's extended family—he is a descendant of the two African American slaves who wrote the song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

In conclusion, I would like to thank the committee once again for the opportunity you have given the Task Force to share with you the history of the African American contribution to the U.S. Capitol and our recommendations for recognizing their labor. After 200 years, it is time for America to recognize these individuals who contributed to our nation's symbols of freedom while never having the opportunity to cherish it themselves. Their history is part of all our history and we all can learn from their contribution.